

Entrepreneurship Development Institute | Handmade in India

Happiness delivery: Has brought cheer to the lives of 6,000 traditional handloom weavers since 2019 by training them on new developments in the business, helping their product volumes improve by 42 per cent and revenue by 75 per cent



Founded in 1983, Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India's (EDII), Dr Sunil Shukla (right) with Tangaliya weaver couple Chandubhai and Gitaben at Dedadara village in Gujarat; Photo by Nandan Dave

On a bright September morning, scores of men and women from in and around Surendranagar, some 120 kilometres from Ahmedabad, gather at a hand-loom training centre run by the Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII), an autonomous body set up in 1983 by a clutch of Indian banks and financial institutions. Most of them are from traditional weaving families that are now struggling to catch up with the big changes in design, marketing and technology. Some of them are young, with waning interest in the slow-paced, presumably low income-generating handloom business, and are at the centre to learn from the experts the global prospects of the business and how it can be run more professionally.

What started as an initiative by the EDII and consulting firm EY, supported by HSBC in 2019, has grown into a large project with far-reaching impact despite two waves of the pandemic, with the centres at Surendranagar and five other clusters training over 6,000 handloom weavers so far. The other clusters where training is imparted are Bhuj in Gujarat, Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh, Kamrup in Assam, Bargarh in Odisha and Salem in Tamil Nadu. "Our primary concern is how to offer customised help to develop new designs, help weavers access credit and find new markets, and leverage the new technologies for doing so," says Dr Sunil Shukla, director general, EDII. Since most of the weavers belong to the informal sector,

the training centres also help them do business in a structured fashion, and enrol as enterprises for better visibility and viability.

The Indian handloom sector has a variety of products categorised under 'wearables' such as the thin cotton towels, sarees, shirts, pants and shawls, and 'non-wearables', such as bags, purses, mats, caps, towels, bed linen, carpets and curtains. The Third Handloom Census (2009-10), recorded nearly 2.8 million households engaged in weaving and allied activities, 87 per cent in rural areas. The northeast accounted for nearly 65.2 per cent of the total handlooms operational in the country. The sector provides employment to 4.3 million weavers, mostly women, most of them illiterate or semi-literate. There is lack of credit, awareness of customer preferences, proper marketing and promotions, as well as technological backwardness, paucity in new designs and weaver numbers.

The biggest challenge, Shukla says, is the next-gen's disinterest in traditional business. To overcome their hesitation and apprehension towards the new ways of doing business, several confidence-building measures had to be taken. Besides training weavers to run their businesses as enterprises, EDII also helps organise exhibitions (virtual due to the pandemic), online buyer-seller meets and market development. A virtual exhibition in 2020 saw interest from buyers in the UAE, US and the UK. Weavers also need assistance in credit management since their past defaults have made banks wary of giving loans. Following these interventions, overall sales volume for these weavers' products has increased by 42 per cent, and revenues were up 75 per cent, claims Shukla. "This is something that has brought us immense joy," says Shukla. Since 2019, as many as 290 new handloom designs have been developed.

Rameshbhai Chauhan, 38, a weaver based in Ahmedabad, joined his father's family occupation after failing his class 10 exam. Their joint family was earning Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 a month. However, two years ago, Chauhan joined EDII's centre and learnt new designs, and digital marketing. His family now makes around Rs 50,000 a month, reaching out to clients even outside the state, using WhatsApp to communicate with clients and share their designs. "At a recent exhibition in Ahmedabad, I made Rs 1.2 lakh in just two hours," says Chauhan. Anand Rathod, 23, another weaver who benefitted from EDII, is helping two younger people set up their looms right from scratch, and also training other weavers in his village use digital marketing. Nothing, it seems, brings more happiness than paying it forward.